

Lost in Translation

***The Buzz About Bees: Biology of a Superorganism*, by Jürgen Tautz, David C. Sandeman and Helga R. Heilmann. Berlin: Springer, 2008. Pp. 284. H/b \$49.95**

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When both the scientist and non-scientist alike think about an organism, it is the plant's or animal's most salient feature that is initially focused upon. The giraffe's neck, peacock's tail, or the human's incredibly large brain and capacity for culture are the defining features of the phenotype. Considering bees, one is prone to list their ability to produce honey or sting. Jürgen Tautz, in his recently translated hit book, *The Buzz About Bees: Biology of a Superorganism* (Tautz et al. 2008), convinces the reader otherwise. The bee has a tremendous uniqueness in that members of a colony act as a superorganism, a characteristic that has infrequently evolved. Tautz, who is at the University of Würzburg in the Institute of Behavioral Physiology and Sociobiology and leads the BEEgroup, methodically outlines the aspects of bee physiology and behavior that make this phenomenon possible, convincing the reader that it is this trait that guarantees the bee a classification as a true wonder of nature.

Without even reading a single word, it is immediately apparent that *The Buzz About Bees* is not the typical popular science trade book. While the U.S. \$49.95 price tag is prone to induce sticker shock, the book is filled with hundreds of top quality photos, illustrating the topics covered. This fact cannot be over emphasized: it would be a shame for *The Buzz About Bees* to be relegated to the bookshelf after reading when it belongs on the coffee table.

However, this is no simplistic picture book. While this work can be appreciated by the layman, its audience is assumed to have some basic biology knowledge and will be most enjoyed by apiarists or those in the animal/natural sciences. Tautz does not shy away from covering complex topics, and he succeeds in doing so by breaking down complicated material into easily understandable concepts.

This book, while good on many levels, is not without problems. Despite its strengths, it is debatable whether the extremely high price tag for a 284-page book that can be read in a single sitting (a feat made possible by the amount of wonderful photographs) is worth it. Some of the writing comes off verbose and awkward, which is most likely due to the translation. The prose feels like the text was automatically translated by a computer: one can't quite put a finger on it, but something is off. Unfortunately, this characteristic would not allow me to ever become fully engaged in the book. This impression, however, cannot be asserted with much strength because I am unable to comment on the original language version. Additionally, the included author profile suggests that Tautz is in the same category as Sagan, Feynman, and Lorenz—an eminent modern communicator of science—an assertion that is most definitely an overstatement. Again, this judgment is probably influenced by the translation, but while the *Buzz* is a good book, it is a far cry from the epic *Cosmos* (Sagan 1980).

Being a superorganism is a mind-blowing trait for a species to possess; unfortunately, this book does not communicate the impact of such a classification, an assertion that would most likely be increasingly true for lay audiences. Further, it would have also been a boon to

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focus more explicitly on group or multilevel selection, a topic central to the study of superorganisms, such as David Sloan Wilson did for bees in *Evolution for Everyone* (Wilson 2007). While the validity of this theory is hotly debated, it should have received its own chapter. Tautz also makes a few evolutionary faux pas, such as referring to an evolutionary hierarchy with lower and higher organisms, promoting a common evolutionary myth (e.g., “As a rule, higher animals couple their reproduction with sex,” p. 37).

The Buzz About Bees is a solid addition to the extant literature, covering in great detail an amazing and often overlooked species. While it does not live up to the promises contained in the first few pages, I would

recommend this book to students of biology and lovers of nature. While it does have its flaws (at least the English edition), the *Buzz* is an overpriced yet worthwhile read.

References

- Sagan C. *Cosmos*. New York: Random House; 1980.
- Tautz J, Sandeman DC, Heilmann HR. *The buzz about bees: biology of a superorganism*. Berlin: Springer; 2008.
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